

IMES BRIDGE  
(Wilkins Mill Bridge)

Spanning a ravine south of County Road G50, .5 mile west of I-35

Saint Charles

Madison County

Iowa

HAER IA-94

IA-94

## PHOTOGRAPHS

## WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## IMES BRIDGE (Wilkins Mill Bridge)

HAER No. IA-94

LOCATION: Spanning a ravine south of County Road G50, .5 mile west of I-35, Saint Charles, Madison County, Iowa  
UTM: 15.432889.4571355, Saint Charles, Iowa Quadrangle

STRUCTURAL  
TYPE: Town lattice through truss covered bridge

DATE OF  
CONSTRUCTION: 1870, moved 1887 and 1977

DESIGNER/  
BUILDER: John P. Clark

OWNER: Madison County, Iowa

PREVIOUS USE: Vehicular bridge

PRESENT USE: Historic landmark and tourist attraction

SIGNIFICANCE: Imes Bridge is one of nineteen covered bridges built in Madison County, Iowa, in the late nineteenth century, and the oldest of five that survive.

HISTORIAN: Researched and written by Lola Bennett, Summer 2002

PROJECT  
INFORMATION: The National Covered Bridges Recording Project is part of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a long-range program to document historically significant engineering and industrial works in the United States. HAER is administered by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, a division of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The Federal Highway Administration funded the project.

### RELATED

DOCUMENTATION: HAER No. IA-64, Holliwell Bridge; HAER No. IA-92, Cutler Bridge; HAER No. IA-93, Hogback Bridge; HAER No. IA-95, Roseman Bridge

## **Chronology**

- 1805 America's first covered bridge built at Philadelphia.
- 1820 Ithiel Town patents the Town lattice truss.
- 1844 G.B. Clark erects Iowa's first covered bridge at Fort Des Moines.
- 1846 Iowa becomes the twenty-ninth state admitted to the Union.
- 1849 Madison County created.
- 1868 Eli Cox builds Madison County's first covered bridge near his farm.
- 1870 Madison County adopts Town Lattice plan for bridges.
- 1871 J.P. Clark builds Imes Bridge.
- 1872 Madison County erects first iron bridge over Middle River at Compton's Mill.
- 1884 Madison County stops building covered bridges.
- 1887 Imes Bridge moved to Clinton Creek southwest of Hanley.
- 1933 Madison County Historical Society begins campaign to save covered bridges.
- 1950 Madison County Board of Supervisors votes in favor of preserving covered bridges.
- 1970 Madison County Covered Bridge Festival organized.
- 1977 Imes Bridge moved to its present location just east of St. Charles.
- 1992 Robert James Waller writes *The Bridges of Madison County*.
- 1997 Imes Bridge rehabilitated at a cost of \$31,807.
- 2002 Imes Bridge recorded by the Historic American Engineering Record.

## Introduction

Between 1868 and 1884, Madison County erected nineteen wooden covered bridges. Over time, all but five of these structures were lost to floods, fires, progress or willful destruction. In 1933, the Madison County Historical Society began campaigning to preserve the county's ten surviving covered bridges, but they faced strong opposition from progress-minded citizens and local farmers, who desired modern open spans. Controversy continued for nearly two decades, and during that time, several more covered bridges were lost.

In 1950, the Madison County Board of Supervisors finally agreed to maintain the county's seven surviving covered bridges as tourist attractions. One by one, the bridges were moved or bypassed over the next three decades, but the county upheld its commitment to preserve them. In 1970, the county held the first annual Madison County Covered Bridge Festival, a time-honored event that now draws thousands of visitors each year. Tourism increased dramatically in the 1990s following the publication and subsequent movie adaptation of Robert James Waller's novel, *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Unfortunately, the covered bridges are still threatened by vandalism and arson. McBride Bridge was burned in 1983, Cedar Bridge was burned in 2002 (and rebuilt in 2004), and there were subsequent arson attempts on Hogback and Roseman bridges. In cooperation with the Coalition for Advanced Wood Structures (USDA Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory and Iowa State University Bridge Engineering Center), Madison County is currently testing a remote-monitoring system to identify and mitigate potentially destructive activities at covered bridges. The ultimate goal is to develop tools for long-term preservation of historic timber bridges across the country.<sup>1</sup>

## Description

Imes Bridge is a 127', single-span Town lattice truss covered wooden bridge with an auxiliary queenpost truss. The bridge has a gable roof and is covered with vertical plank siding. The structure is supported on timber piles and spans a shallow ravine next to the highway.

## History

In January 1870, the Madison County Board of Supervisors voted to build a bridge at Wilkin's Mill on Middle River near Patterson. Constructed by local carpenter J.P. Clark in the winter of 1870-71, the county accepted the bridge in June 1871.

In 1887, Wilkin's Mill Bridge was moved to Clanton Creek in Hanley in 1887. At this site, it was known as Imes, or King, Bridge. The bridge carried traffic until 1977, when a new concrete

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<sup>1</sup> Coalition for Advanced Wood Structures, "Remote Monitoring of Historic Covered Timber Bridges in Madison County for the Prevention of Arson and Vandalism," *Research in Progress*, 2003.

span was built nearby. Imes Bridge was moved to a wayside park just east of St. Charles. The Madison County Covered Bridge Committee financed the move.

## Design

Ithiel Town (1784-1844) was an architect from New Haven, Connecticut. He is remembered today for his role in developing the Greek Revival style of architecture, along with his partner, Alexander Jackson Davis. Town designed a number of churches, state capitols and other public buildings that still stand today. He also designed one of the most widely used wooden bridge trusses, for which he received patents in 1820 and 1835.

The Town truss was a lattice of sawn planks that eliminated the need for an arch or large hewn timbers. Rather than having notched joints, the lattice intersections were fastened with large wooden pegs, or treenails (trunnels). The truss functioned as a series of overlapping triangles, so that the load in any one triangle affected distribution of stress in all other triangles. The web members could handle both tension and compression and spread loads over a wide area.

Ithiel Town built only a few bridges himself, but used this same type of truss in the roofs of several important buildings he designed, and he received royalties of a dollar per foot of truss from bridge builders who used his patent. Town lattice truss bridges were built in large numbers in New England, New York and the South throughout the nineteenth century. Seeking Ithiel Town's own objective of "simple, permanent and economical" bridge design, in 1870, the Madison County Board of Supervisors issued a directive that all spans over 40' should be lattice truss covered bridges.<sup>2</sup> The local newspaper summarized their decision as follows:

There has been much complaint about the erection of county bridges, as to their stability and make. The plan by the Board does away with the stone abutments, thus saving such expense and enabling the county to build a number more bridges. It is claimed that timber can be readily replaced, and that ice will affect it less than stone. They also require that bridges shall be covered. The expense of the roof is more than made up by the permanency of the bridge. Instead of the old style framing for the support of the bent, they have adopted the lattice work frame, like that used to support the ceiling of our court room.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ithiel Town, *A Description of Ithiel Town's Improvement in the Construction of Wood and Iron Bridges* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1821).

<sup>3</sup> *Winterset Madisonian* (Winterset, Iowa), 12 January 1870, 1.

**Appendix A: Madison County Covered Bridges**

	Cox	1868	Eli Cox		Replaced 1913
	Callison	1868	Eli Cox		
	Kellogg	1869			
	Brown (Walker/Fletcher)	1871	J.P. Clark	Town lattice truss; pitch roof	
WG #15-61-06	Imes (Wilkins Mill)	1871	J.P. Clark	Town lattice truss; pitch roof	Moved 1887, 1977
	Wiggins (McBride)	1871	J.P. Clark	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Burned 1983
WG #15-61-02	Cutler (Donahoe)	1871	Eli Cox	Town lattice truss; pitch roof	Moved 1970
	Rose (Dunmire)	1871		Town lattice truss; pitch roof	Replaced c1910
	Afton (Reed's Crossing)	1872	Eli Cox	Town lattice truss	Destroyed by ice 1895
	Rhyno's Ford	1872	S.W. Winkley	Town lattice truss	
	Klingensmith (Bennett)	c1875	J.P. Clark H.P. Jones	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Replaced 1934
	Coopers Ford	1877	Eli Cox	Town lattice truss	Destroyed by flood 1898
	Cottonwood Ford	1878	Eli Cox	Town lattice truss	
	Badger (Welch)	1878	J.P. Clark	Town lattice truss; pitch roof	Replaced late 1920s
	Backbone	1878	H.P. Jones G.K. Foster	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Burned 1914
WG #15-61-05	Holliwell	1880	H.P. Jones G.K. Foster	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Bypassed 1986 Rehabilitated 1997
WG #15-61-07	Roseman (Oak Grove)	1883	H.P. Jones G.K. Foster	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Bypassed 1981
	Cedar (Casper)	1883	H.P. Jones G.K. Foster	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Moved 1921; Bypassed 1964; Burned 2002
WG #15-61-04	Hogback	1884	H.P. Jones G.K. Foster	Town lattice truss; flat roof	Bypassed 1993

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